



# Historical Group

## NEWSLETTER and SUMMARY OF PAPERS

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### A Blue Plaque for Dr Alphonse Normandy

#### **The unveiling ceremony**

On Friday 23 September 2016, a blue plaque was unveiled in honour of the nineteenth-century analytical chemist, Dr Alphonse Normandy, who lived and worked at 67 [1] Judd Street between 1850 and 1859. He was elected a Fellow of the Chemical Association in 1854 and was a member of the Chemical Association Council between 1860-1863.

The plaque's installation and the unveiling ceremony was organised by the Marchmont Association [2], a Bloomsbury amenity group that has been running its own commemorative plaque scheme since 2009. The plaque was sponsored by the International Desalination Association (IDA) whose current President Dr Emilio Gabbrielli attended the event, along with Dr Jim Birkett a former president of the IDA and co-author of a paper on Dr Normandy, entitled "Normandy's Patent Marine Aerated Fresh Water Company: a family business for 60 years." [3]

Other invited guests included Ursula Annunziata, President of the European Desalination Association, John Nicholson, a member of the RSC Historical Group, and Bob Flanagan, Chair of Friends of West Norwood Cemetery (FOWNC), where Dr Normandy was buried in 1864. Councillor Nadia Shah, Mayor of Camden joined the VIPs in attendance, as well as Dr Niki Panourgias, Alphonse Normandy's great-great-great grandson. A number of local residents and a reporter from the local newspaper [4] also enjoyed the unveiling occasion, which was followed by a reception in Casa Tua, a neighbourhood restaurant, also sponsored by the IDA.

## The Blue Plaque



Those shown in the photograph include the Mayor of Camden, Cllr Nadia Shah (third from right), Niki Panourgia (great-great-great grandson of Dr Normandy; centre), Debbie Radcliffe (organiser of the event; second from left); and, John Nicholson of the RSCHG on the extreme right. Photograph courtesy of Ricci de Freitas.

## Discovering Dr Normandy

As Dr Birkett's co-author of the above paper, I admit that I am not a chemist and have no knowledge of desalination techniques. I do however happen to live in the house where Dr Normandy lived and worked in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century, and initiated the idea of a plaque to him at this location.

During restoration of the Georgian front door in 2010, I discovered a small bronze plaque buried under several layers of thick black paint. This bore an engraving of the name M Bates and it stimulated my curiosity as to who had lived in the house in the past 180 years. Research of Camden's Rates Books brought the name of Dr Alphonse Normandy to my attention.

Intrigued by his French origins, I did a quick internet search, and found that Dr Normandy's achievements were significant enough to warrant an entry in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. I also discovered a brief article written by Dr Jim Birkett of Maine, USA. We corresponded. Jim informed me he was giving a paper on Dr Normandy at the IDA Congress in China in November 2013 and kindly suggested we collaborate on the project. Being an enthusiastic historic researcher, I jumped at the chance. Another internet search revealed an article in the *FOWNC newsletter*, researched and written in 2003 by Elizabeth Panourgias-Morrison, Dr Normandy's great-great grand-daughter.

The idea of peeling back the years from one century to another has always appealed to me. In his will Dr Normandy bequeathed two pianos to his daughter Louise (from whom Elizabeth is descended). I invited Liz for tea and we conversed in the same room as her illustrious forebear might have dined in 150 years ago. There's a piano there today as well. Unfortunately, long term illness prevented Elizabeth from being able to join us at the unveiling event, but it was good that her son Niki was able to represent the family. *[Elizabeth unfortunately passed away shortly afterwards]*

### **Rescue from obscurity**

The installation of a plaque on the face of a Grade II listed building in Judd Street requires planning permission from Camden Council. During their deliberation, I was informed that the Senior Conservation Officer queried the “worthiness” of the subject, describing Normandy as being “relatively obscure.”

Dr Birkett and I have long thought it surprising that Alphonse Normandy had fallen into obscurity. Perhaps he simply slipped under the fame radar due to an early death and lack of attention afterwards, except from Henry Minchin Noad, who re-wrote Normandy's *Commercial Handbook of Chemical Analysis* in 1875, following the 1872 revision of the 1860 Adulteration of Food and Drugs Act.

Dr Normandy's Handbook was published in 1850. He was an acknowledged expert in food adulteration and his work must have had some influence on the Act itself. As well as underestimating his pioneering developments in desalination processes, we feel that posterity has also undervalued Dr Normandy's contribution to exposing commonly used but poisonous additives in food and drink. His desire to provide practical guidance to people less conversant with chemical analysis also resulted in the publication of Normandy's *The Farmer's Manual of Agricultural Chemistry* in 1853.

### **The research continues**

Research can become addictive, especially when the subject seems to have been written out of history. But therein lies the challenge. Documents in Kew Archives and the British Library have already revealed new information about Dr Normandy's legal battles, as well as his membership of the Royal Institution, for which he was recommended by Michael Faraday and other well-known scientists of the day.

A visit to Rouen gave context to his early years in France. Genealogical websites have provided names and dates of his family and descendants. Dr Birkett has visited the remains of an 1862 Normandy multi-effect desalination unit in Key West and found evidence for other sites (such as Malta), as well as in South America where they were crucial for the development of the mining industry in Chile and Bolivia. I made a daytrip to Heligoland (a small German archipelago in the North Sea, formerly a British possession) and found myself giving information to the Librarian about Dr Normandy's important role in that island's history.

## **Reviving recognition and respect**

We hope the plaque will help encourage a revival of interest in this 19<sup>th</sup> century chemist and desalination pioneer.

Dr Normandy's obituary in *The Lancet* (May 1864) ends with the words: "He has left a scientific name which will be long remembered with respect, and a personal reputation which will not be easily effaced from the affectionate recollection of numerous distinguished and sorrowing friends."

The blue plaque can be seen on the ground floor of an early nineteenth-century Bloomsbury townhouse, part of a Grade II listed terrace that lies on the west side of Judd Street, leading from St Pancras Station to Brunswick Square – in the direction of Russell Square. I watch as visitors to London pass by the house, and hope that when they glance up at the plaque and wonder who Alphonse Normandy is, that their curiosity is aroused.

## **References**

1. The street was renumbered in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and is no. 91 today.
2. [www.marchmontassociation.org](http://www.marchmontassociation.org)
3. Jim Birkett and Debbie Radcliffe, "Normandy's Patent Marine Aerated Fresh Water Company: A Family Business for 60 years, 1851-1910," *IDAS Journal of Desalination and Water Reuse*, 2014 **6** (1) 24-32.
4. [www.camdennewjournal.com/soapy-blue-plaque](http://www.camdennewjournal.com/soapy-blue-plaque)

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